

1690
The Manly, Independent Thinker.

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A D D R E S S :

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

ALUMNI ASSOCIATION OF RUTGERS COLLEGE,

J U L Y 24, 1855.

BY THE

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OF HUDSON, N. Y.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE ASSOCIATION.

NEW YORK:

R. & R. BRINKERHOFF, 103 FULTON STREET.

1855.

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Manly Independent Bulletin Vol. 1

1875



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ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN OF THE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION:

WE are continually reminded that we live in a remarkable age—an age noted for diffusion of knowledge, scientific discovery, and the application of the principles of science to the practical purposes of life.

The age having been defined, the men who are needed to meet its demands are in the next place described. And really, we should suppose from what we hear, that men are needed at present, such as the world has never seen, or all things will be sure to go to ruin. It is complacently affirmed, that unprecedented responsibility rests upon the guardians and teachers of youth; that the old paths of patient, plodding industry in the pursuit of studies that seem to have no immediate utility, must be abandoned, and the young American of the nineteenth century be instructed in a knowledge of the useful and practical. The scholar, according to the old sense of the term, is ridiculed as a learned, helpless weakling—a drone in the hive of busy workers.

But is there not a fallacy in the reasoning? Does it follow by sound logic that because the characteristics of one age differ from those of another, therefore very different kinds of men and different modes of training are needed? Is a man best qualified for a profession by devotion from boyhood to a study of the nature and duties of that profession? When a spirit of inquiry, and a thirst for knowledge are abroad, are not men of vigorous, independent minds, and high moral principle, needed to meet those demands? And what different kind of men would you suggest to create that spirit where it is lacking? The opposite ages of light and darkness require the same sort of strong independent thinkers. If you train a man from childhood with

a view to a particular calling, or to meet peculiar circumstances or aspects of the time, what if he should be obliged to abandon that calling, or those circumstances and aspects should change, as is often the case, in twenty-four hours? He then becomes helpless—an object of pity if not contempt. But if you train him to have strength in himself, he will at once enter on a new calling, accommodate himself to new circumstances, and work in the new times as well as he did in the old. The man who knows how with a strong hand to take hold of the various work that changing times place before him, is the well educated man. It is the business of parents and teachers in every conceivable age, to form such men, men who will bring their own powers to bear on subjects; who will grapple with difficulties; who will be able to break every web that sophistry can weave; who will on the one hand accept nothing without proof; and on the other, will dare to go as far as proof will lead them.

The man trained to vigorous, independent thought, whom we have in our eye, by no means ignores the wisdom of the past. He does not commence with the assumption that nothing has ever been rightly known, and that it is his mission to begin all sciences *de novo*. He does not rack his brain to discover without help whether the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the sides. He does not feel it incumbent on him to go through the same experience with Euclid. He does not deem it important that he should critically examine every fact of physical science, and test every proposition by experiment. Nor does he painfully evolve for himself principles of law, and dogmas of theology. On the contrary, he grants that much may be considered as settled, and he is thankful for the processes and conclusions of others. He exercises himself, however, in carefully examining those processes and conclusions, and in judging of the value of testimony. In many cases he can, in a few moments, satisfy himself of the correctness of a proposition which was in the first place arrived at after the patient investigations of numerous successive generations. He neither blindly accepts nor summarily rejects, but guards against sophistry and false testimony. He does not value anything *merely* because it is seen through the dim haze of distant time. It is pleasant to look upon the relics of antiquity, but it may well be asked, why were the an-

cients more likely to be right than the keen and earnest men of a generation that has the advantage of their views not only, but of the views of all those who have followed them? Has not every period of the world's history, whether calamitous or prosperous, left a rich legacy of wisdom to enlighten the coming ages? Must we then overleap those periods, despise their lessons, distrust the powers God has given us, and humbly accept what men, whose advantages were inferior to ours, so patiently worked out? This does not appear reasonable, nor do the practical effects commend it. Distance may lend enchantment to the view. But was it not the same when what is now antiquity was the present; when the men whom we revere lived and moved? Why did not they modestly bow to what was antiquity in their day, and why should not we pass even them by in order to get to that earlier antiquity?

Nor does he ignore the wisdom of contemporaries and at once pronounce this discovery in science or that political measure; this view in theology or that ecclesiastical policy sheer nonsense, simply because he is not the father of it. Nor does he regard all as uncertain and unsettled which he has not had the time or means to investigate. He allows a division of labor, and accepts the contributions of those who work in other departments. Nor in order to establish his independence and originality does he consider it necessary that he should differ from every one else, and always assume the attitude of a disputant.

It is not an easy matter to attain to true mental independence. Mountains of difficulty are created by defects in early education. Fetters are gradually forged, and the mind is insensibly bound. Habits are formed that weaken the powers, and create a state of slavish dependence. When the faculties begin to unfold like the leaves of the opening flower, they are either neglected or they are unduly stimulated, instead of being gently and carefully trained. Often the production of youthful prodigies is aimed at. Parents are ashamed of their children unless they can play the orator at the age of three, and have systems of geography and grammar in their heads at four. Their earliest associations are connected with books, lessons, and hard benches. The result is that they become wonderfully smart children, the talk of the whole town, and many mothers are put to shame by the backwardness of their darlings. But retribution must come for

the breach of God's law. When these children should begin to work, their work is done. The physical constitution cannot endure the burden put upon it, or if it survive, the overtaxed brain refuses to do expected service, and every fond anticipation of eminence is disappointed. A stunted shrub appears where we had hoped to enjoy the shade of a wide-branching cedar of Lebanon.

The child should be turned out into the garden and field. No man with a family should, in these days of railroad facilities, consent to live on a lot just about large enough to make comfortable graves for his household. His bright-eyed children should have a chance to look upon the blue sky and roam over the green fields. Books should be a part of the child's play. Its life should be play. The mind will work. The observing and reasoning powers as well as the memory, will be exercised on what is seen. Thus will both mind and body mature, and proper preparation be made for attention to books in due time. A common and pernicious mistake is made by parents when they regard the acquisition of knowledge as the great end of education instead of physical, mental, and moral training. It is true that the acquisition of knowledge is inseparable from such training, but it is the incidental benefit.

Teachers sometimes have a similar ambition. They aim to make their pupils learn fast and to know much. Sometimes they are tempted by a state of dependence to gratify the unreasonable expectations of parents against their own better judgments. Thus a superficial knowledge or smattering of many sciences is substituted for a thorough knowledge of a few. By this process "infant phenomena" are produced, but in vain do we look for independent thinking men and women.

A boy has reached the age of fifteen, and he thinks it is high time to enter college. Some of his associates are about to graduate at that age. But there is one great difficulty in his way. He knows that he is not qualified to enter such an institution as College, of which he has rather exalted notions. Still it is time that he were in, for the age is waiting impatiently for him to come out on the active stage, as commencement orations have it. Once in, he has no doubt that learning will come to him very easily. His examiners think that he might be better prepared, but they need students, and they assure him

that by diligence he will soon be able to make up for every deficiency. But, poor boy ! he soon finds that Greek, Latin, and Mathematics, do not come to one even in College, but must be diligently sought after. He is behind his class, cannot get up to it, is discouraged, and leaves in disgust. Or perhaps he remains in College, for that can be done, even though study be quitted, though this I would speak softly. He now argues himself into the conviction that he can improve his time better by attending to the practical. Why should he bother himself with the study of dead languages, for he does not intend to be a pedagogue ? Why should he puzzle himself with the mysteries of Algebra and Conic sections, for he does not intend to be an engineer or surveyor ? He intends to follow a more excellent way than that devised by those who prescribed the routine of College studies. He wisely inquires what will be demanded of him in active life. If he have an eye to politics he studies the Constitution, and keeps himself posted up in the knowledge of parties and measures. If to law, he trains his conscience to say that it is of supreme importance for him to attend to the debates in the Literary Society. If to literature, he occupies himself with the last novel, only for the sake of improving his style, or to English essays, or poetry, or he will even venture on a history, if it be written brilliantly. If to the pulpit, he works his way into the Theological Seminary, where he finds the digging of Hebrew roots heavy work, while Systematic Theology and Church History are valleys of dry bones. Looking to the demands to be made on him, he concludes that it will be the most profitable for him to spend his time in the preparation of sermons, and to exercise his gifts in preaching, as opportunities may offer. The result is obvious, and he compliments himself on the wisdom of his course. He obtains license with twenty sermons in his pocket, while his less shrewd neighbor has scarcely five. It is true that they contain more of rhetoric and sentiment than sound theology ; but all the better for that, because he distances every competitor, and starts at once as a popular preacher, and that is enough. But by and by, when light on dark points is sought, when novelties in theology are broached, when plausible errors are proclaimed, and new interpretations are put forth, he learns his weakness, and others learn it too. His flock look in vain to him to solve their doubts and to grapple with their

difficulties; and he falls down from the height of adulation to which they had exalted him, and they mournfully exclaim, "Art thou also become weak as we?"

An eminent scholar from Germany has told me, that in one of the towns of Prussia is a Gymnasium, at which two-thirds of the most celebrated men of Germany—theologians, lawyers, poets, military men, naturalists, statesmen, &c., have received their mental training in boyhood. In it, nothing whatever is taught but Greek, Latin, and Mathematics. The modern Educational Reformer will say, "The students from that Institution are undoubtedly excellent scholars in the dead languages, and capital mathematicians, but how poorly prepared for the practical business of life! Why, they know nothing!" True, they may not know a great deal, but they are strong, trained men, able to take hold of anything they please, and to succeed in it. They have not learned by rote, they have not piled up mingled treasure and rubbish in the memory. But they have secured that which might well be counted great gain even if they had lost all their Greek, Latin, and Mathematics, on the day they left the Institution. They have secured the power to concentrate thought, to analyse subjects; to discriminate, to generalize. Ernesti, a pupil of this school, devoted himself to the study of Cicero, and became the most accomplished Ciceronian of his day. The King of Prussia, wishing to do him honor, appointed him Professor of Theology. "A splendid professor of theology will Ernesti make, who has never read a page on the subject!" said some, deridingly. "But," said the Principal of that Gymnasium, "wait two years, and E. will be the most popular lecturer in theology in Germany." And so he was.

In contrast with this, at the opening of an Academy, where the Languages are taught as chief branches, one of our modern educational reformers contended that these studies were comparatively valueless, and for the profound reason that we have good translations of the works of the Ancients, and can get at their thoughts without wasting time on the study of their language. He had no doubt, moreover, that a farmer's boy, who in vacation should be able to tell his father how to raise more corn from an acre of ground than he had ever done before, would impress that father with a more profound sense of the value of academies than if he were to pronounce a Greek oration

before him. We will not dispute this. And yet it remains a question, whether the conviction of the old farmer on the subject would be worth a tithe of the extra corn raised, through the learning of his hopeful son.

The idea that the time is wasted which is devoted to studies whose chief effect is mental training, is obviously absurd. You might as well say that the child who creeps and rolls about the floor, or the boy who builds cob-houses and mud palaces and forts to tumble down the next moment, is doing an immense amount of unnecessary work, and utter your jeremiads over the waste of time and energy that should have been devoted to the useful and practical. The truth is, that the child is exercising his true vocation as faithfully as the man who directs the councils of nations, or brings to light the mysteries of nature. And who can tell how much the men who are influential and useful owe their positions to the devotion with which, when children, they applied themselves, not to the work of men, but to the pursuits of children! Fond parents may have mourned over what they called their heedlessness and inattention, when, in truth, they were unwittingly, in obedience to the promptings of nature, laying the solid foundations of future eminence.

Defective training is the prolific parent of vicious mental habits, whose name is legion, and which are so many obstacles in the way of manly, independent thought. Indolence is one of these, marked by distaste for patient investigation and inability to concentrate and fix the thoughts for a length of time upon a subject. Sir Isaac Newton said, that if he differed from other men, it was in the ability to fix the attention on one subject for a length of time. When the mind is unable to do this, it is virtually indolent, for though busy, it is "laboriously doing nothing;" dipping here and there, reading a page of this volume, and then of that. The result will always be narrow, superficial views of truth, instead of large and comprehensive ideas. These men stand on one of the sides of the pyramid of truth, and accept what they there see as the whole truth. They are too lazy to walk around and see the other sides, and if they did they would be confused, and unable to discover harmony in things that seem to differ. Truth is one, harmonious in all its parts. The man of independent, comprehensive

thought, takes into view all the parts. He cannot be a one-idea man any more than a capable machinist can confine his view to a single wheel or spring in a complicated piece of machinery. He looks at the whole as one, and finds unity in diversity. There is a vast difference between the men of one idea, the riders of a hobby, and the men of one purpose, men of a high and noble aim who make everything subservient to its attainment.

Most curious would be the result of a searching inquiry into the origin of our opinions. We should be amazed to learn how few have been adopted as the result of careful, unprejudiced investigation. Some of them have come to us by inheritance from our fathers, along with their goods and chattels. We know that their views in politics, religion, or domestic economy, were right, and every year only strengthens our prejudices and disqualifies us the more from bringing these views to the test. In many cases, creeds which were intended for helps, and are so when rightly used, are abused and made snares. Sometimes the terrors of priestcraft have taken hold on those who were too venturesome in pursuit of truth, scientific or religious. Sometimes political restraints, civil edicts, and penalties, not only bind the tongue and seal the lips, but crush the budding germs of thought. Sometimes by careful education, every trace of intelligent, active thought has been obliterated, and man purposely reduced to a mere machine, subject to the will of another. That is the perfect work and crowning glory of Jesuitism.

Sometimes Public Opinion is bowed to as authority from which there is no appeal. Sometimes the author of an opinion, or the school in which it is taught, is enough to condemn it. We all have our Nazareths out of which no good thing can come. Sometimes we meet men who will not venture an opinion on any subject until they have heard one from somebody else. Others again take pride in the idea of being thought independent, and, crooked and perverse generation that they are, take pains to adopt what others reject, and to reject what others adopt. They are slaves as well as their neighbors, though to a master within instead of without. In truth, the power of the various passions to warp the judgment, their tyranny over the understanding, can scarcely be over-estimated.

"He that ruleth his own spirit is better than he that taketh a city."

Sometimes men are attracted by the novelty or beauty of some idea or theory, and fall in love with it, as a susceptible youth surrenders instanter to a pretty face. Sometimes the opinions of great men are deferred to as oracular. Sometimes the great are slavishly imitated, and the man who by the assiduous cultivation of his powers might have made something of himself, becomes a laughing-stock. The examples of the great are not before us to be copied. Every man has his own mental constitution, in the development and training of which he may profit by the merits and defects of others. He may learn much from the study of a Chalmers or a Webster, but what could be more contemptible than a little Chalmers or a puny Webster?

Sometimes consistency is valued more than truth, and leads to a dogged, obstinate adherence to opinions in the face of the clearest evidence of their falsity. We all have among our acquaintances those of whom we can safely say, that if they have committed themselves to any position they will stick to it till death. If they listen at all to arguments or testimony to the contrary, it is condescendingly, and in pity to the weakness of those who presume to enlighten them. What they know, they know. Now we hold that it is to no man's credit that he has never changed nor modified his views on any subject. It is "primâ facie" evidence that he has closed his mind against light. The profoundest of men have often had occasion to brave the charge of inconsistency. Most worthy of praise is he who is willing to listen candidly to arguments against his own positions, and to be convinced by them, too. All honor to him who, to an uncompromising love of truth, cheerfully sacrifices the consistency of his present self with his former. Dr. Henry, in his life of Calvin, frequently adverts to the fact that the Great Reformer very early embraced doctrines from which he never swerved, but only developed and matured them. Doubtless that man of extraordinary penetration saw no reason for change. But such cases must be rare. And it is nothing derogatory to Calvin, but the contrary, to say that if he had lived longer he would probably have modified some of his views. His life at least testifies to this, that he adhered to nothing because it was his own, but because he believed it to be the truth. Bancroft

describes him as "pushing inquiry to its utmost verge, and yet valuing inquiry solely as the means of arriving at fixed conclusions."

The manly, independent thinker, is both conservative and progressive. These terms are by no means opposed to each other, as superficial reasoners think. Whatever seems worth preserving in existing institutions, he defends with all his might; but at the same time he does not shrink from pulling down and crushing hoary error. Every plan to improve society and promote human happiness he encourages, if his judgment approves it. According to Paul's direction, he proves all things, and holds fast that which is good. He is a progressive, not a radical. He would not overturn for the sake of building anew. He would not retrace all the steps of his journey for the sake of getting into a new carriage. He believes in increasing light not to be attained by quenching what is possessed, but by adding to it. Nobly did the Puritan pastor, John Robinson, express this view in special reference to religious truth, in his farewell address to the members of his congregation about to embark for America.

"The Reformers were shining lights in their times, yet they penetrated not into the whole counsel of God, but if living would be as willing to embrace further light as that which they first received. It is an article in your covenant that you be ready to receive whatever truth shall be made known to you from the written Word of God. Take heed what you receive for truth, examine it, consider it, compare it with the other scriptures of truth before you receive it. I am verily persuaded, I am very confident, that the Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word."

Untrammelled thought is the handmaid of faith. There is no opposition between reason and faith. There is antagonism between reason and blind credulity. Faith is belief for sufficient cause. Credulity is belief without it. Faith is a virtue, credulity a weakness. Faith, so far from ignoring the action of mind, implies it. It supposes an intelligent apprehension of truth, and a sifting of its claims, the more severe the better. Faith rests not upon naked assertion, but upon testimony, and insists on the severest cross-examination. If it takes the Word of another, it rests on His character as testimony. And thus the simplest

exercise of faith and the highest effort of reason come together in sweet unison when every word that God speaks is received, because God speaks it.

It is also the parent of humility ; for the more profound our views, the deeper our sense of the still unexplored. The sciolist alone will pronounce extravagant and affected the declaration of Newton, that he seemed to himself to have been engaged in picking shells on the sea shore, while the boundless ocean of unexplored truth stretched before him. Chalmers's illustration of the circle of light set in a field of darkness was appropriate: As the diameter of light is enlarged, so is the circumference that divides the light from the surrounding darkness.

It is the source of self-reliance. Every man trained to vigorous, independent thinking, is a self-made man in the only true sense of the term, and not the less so if he have enjoyed great advantages. There are many men of eminence and many blockheads both among those who have passed through College, and among those who have not. The general law is, that the industrious and energetic will succeed, whether their advantages be abundant or scanty. But without industry and energy the greatest advantages will profit a man little. The conclusion is inevitable, that he who has become a man with the help of books and teachers, and college discipline, is a self-made man, as truly as his neighbor who has energetically conquered the obstacles in his way. The result in either case will be a knowledge of one's own strength, and a confidence in one's self, which is the companion of modesty. The nature of this confidence can be better understood than explained.

It is the inspirer of Energy, of which Fowell Buxton said, "The longer I live the more I am certain that the great difference between the feeble and the powerful, the great and the insignificant, is *Energy*, invincible determination—a purpose once fixed and then death or victory. That quality will do anything that can be done in this world ; and no talents, no circumstances, no opportunities, will make a two-legged creature a man without it."

I need scarcely add, and yet cannot let the occasion pass without adding, that a man thus trained has most fearful elements of power. If they be abused he becomes little less than archangel

ruined; if rightly directed, he becomes little less than archangel un-fallen. While, therefore, the mental powers of the man are duly trained, let care be taken that the all-controlling principle which is to make him a bulwark of society, and not an engine for its destruction, be right. That principle is the fear of God, securing the right direction of acquired strength. Where it sways, the eye of Reason will be clear—the judgments of Conscience prompt and correct—the determination of the Will inflexible for the right. Paradoxical it may sound, but it is true that the fulness of the strength of a finite mind is found in the completeness of its subjection to the Infinite.

Men like this, brothers Alumni, the world needs, has in every age needed—men who are able to think, free to speak, ready to act—men who can rise high above every cloud of prejudice and passion, and move in the calm region of principle—men who, with comprehensive glance, can take in opposite extremes, and then fixing the eye on the unmoving pole-star of truth, determinately hold on their way, heedless of bribes on the one hand, and of threats on the other.

Such should we be—such are we—if we have been true to ourselves and to our Maker. If not, the least that we can do is, with one voice, to warn those who are following us, that all that is expected of them is, that each one strive to make of himself a strong, independent, true man. This done, he may well let the questions of position, sphere, influence, rest with Him to whom they rightly belong.

